DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 025 PS 025 035

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TITLE Latchkey Children: Are They Prepared for Self-Care.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *After School Programs; Child Rearing; Elementary Education; *Employed Parents; *Latchkey Children; *Parent Attitudes; School Age Day Care; Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS Child Safety; Parent Surveys; *Self Care

ABSTRACT

Although children left at home without adult supervision may function very well, studies have shown potential problems with self-care and latchkey children. This study investigated the attitudes of 30 employed parents in New York whose first or third grade children were regularly left home alone after school. The 20-question survey covered such areas as parents' perceptions of their children's ability to take care of themselves, use of older siblings as caregivers, activities the child was allowed to engage in while home alone (such as television viewing or playing outside), availability of outside help in case of emergency, satisfaction with the latchkey arrangement, and opinions on after-school programs. Results indicated that while most parents perceived child self-care as a positive experience for their children, most felt guilty, concerned, or ambivalent about leaving their children home alone. Respondents were also dissatisfied with the local school-based after-school program. In terms of common activities while home alone, most children were not allowed outside but were allowed to watch television for entertainment. (The report concludes with a discussion of important aspects of a positive after-school program. Contains 8 references.) (EV)

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Latchkey Children

Are They Prepared For Self - Care

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Introduction

Although advances in technology may have changed our lives, the need for traditional parenting has not changed as more women enter the work force and with rising number of single-parent homes the availability and quality of latchkey and child care is a great importance our country in terms of the impact on the education of these children. From observation, a great number of our children in grades 1-3 are taken home by older siblings. The lives of our children have changed dramatically in the last decade. Older siblings are beginning to take on the role parents had. How are these children functioning as parent substitutes?

According to Congressman Tauke (1988) there are 8.2 million children under age 5 with working mothers and about 18.3 million children from age of 5-14 with working mothers. He estimated that as many as 5-10 million children under the age of 13 come home every school day to no adult supervision. According to Robert L. DelCampo and Diana S. DelCampo (1995, page8) our society expects parents to be responsible for the children. Most jobs are scheduled from 8:00 to 5:00, which means that it is possible for children to be alone for approximately one hour in the morning to two or three hours in the afternoon.

According to some studies although some of the children left at home without any adult supervision functioned very good, studies also show that self-care can create a risky and neglectful situation for the children. Vandell and Corasanity (1988, page 12) speculated about potential effects that latchkey situation may have on a child's academic, emotional, social and behavioral development. In reference to the academic he stated that a latchkey child may have poorer grades because of the absence of direct supervision with respect to emotional sphere because the latchkey child spends more time alone, this may result in feeling of loneliness, sadness, fearfulness and isolation. He also stated that the latchkey children may not be given the opportunity to socialize. This also could prevent the child from developing adequate social skills. Evidence has shown that there is a price to pay by children for self-care. There is an increased sense of fear, vulnerability to peer pressure and later on the greatest likelihood of substance abuse.

In one of the few urban studies with a relatively large sample, the age of the child in self-care was the greatest predictor of children's fear. (Roland, Robinson &Coleman, 1986) Of the parent surveyed, 51% of those who reported their children to be fearful and apprehensive about the latchkey arrangement had kindergartners to 3rd graders. They are afraid of noises and break-ins. They are afraid of emergencies with the house that they might not be able to handle. They tend to watch too much unsupervised television that will often promote fear.

Often parents do not permit friends to come over for fear of fighting or accidents and for the responsibility for someone else's child. As a result the latchkey child often feels isolated, bored and rejected.

As Lynette and T. J. Long point out in "The Handbook for Latchkey Children and their Parents" On the whole, latchkey children spend more time alone and less time with their friends. Yet the Elementary school years are a time when children learn how to interact with others.

Piaget calls the period between the ages of 7-12 the concrete operational stage. At this time children are interested in their achievements and self worth. In order to judge their self worth children need their peers for comparison. These children need role models, friends and opportunities for exploration and experiences that allow them to find their place in the world.

As the children enter adolescence there is a need for independence and more responsibility. Young adults are vulnerable to both positive and negative influences (Marx, 1989, page 4). It is at this time compared to students who were under constant adult supervision, those who were in self-care for more than ten hours per week were twice as likely to smoke Marijuana. (Richardson, Dwyer, McGuigan, Hansen, Dent, Johnson, Sussman, Brannon ,Flay 1989, page 9).

In a national survey of parents and teachers (Harris, 1988 page 7) a majority of teachers said that the major reason children have difficulty in school is that they are isolated and lack supervision after school.

Method

The subjects surveyed were 30 working mothers from two schools in the Bronx. The parents worked either full time or part time. In order to establish whether subjects had experienced latchkey arrangement the teachers conducting the survey observed who was responsible for picking up their first and third grade students at dismissal. From the two locations we were fortunate to have thirty parents who were willing to complete the survey for us.

Procedure

A survey consisting of twenty questions were distributed to each participants. There was a cover letter attached which explained why we are conducting the survey. It also stated that participants should not include their names or any personal information on the survey. The survey was completed over a two week period. Responses were collected and analyzed by the two teachers conducting the survey.

Results

Question 1. Do you work? 70% of the parents worked at least 40 hours per week and 30 worked at least 15 hours per week.

Question 2. What time do you leave for work? Of the total number of participants surveyed 56.7% leave home before 7:30 a.m., leaving the children to lock up the house and prepare their own breakfast. Parents stated that their children cannot be dropped off at school because the schools are not opened before 8:00 a.m.
Question 3. What time do you get home? 93.3% got home by 6 PM. 23.3% got home by 4 PM and 13.3% got home by 9 PM.

Question 4. How many children do you have? Of the thirty participants we surveyed 26.67 had 3 or more children. 53.33% had two children and 20% had one child.

Question 5. Are your children registered in a school setting? 30% of the parents stated that their children were attending daycare . 70% were enrolled in Elementary school or Junior High.

Question 6. Do your older children take care of your younger child? 40 % of the parents surveyed stated that the older siblings care for the younger child.

Question 7. Are any of your children able to care for themselves? 60% stated that the children were capable of caring for themselves.

Question 8. Do you allow your children to play outside when you are not at home? 87% of the parents surveyed said no and 13% said yes.

Of those who said no: Parents indicated that the area in which they live was not safe enough to have the children play outside without adult supervision. They also stated that they would not be able to reach them if they were not in the house.

Question 9. What do your children do after school? 100% of the parents we surveyed said the children were responsible for completing their homework, doing chores and then they could watch TV One parent said that the children had enough to do to keep themselves occupied.

Question 10. Are your children able to handle household emergencies? Of the total number of participants surveyed 90% of the parents said that the children were capable of taking care of most emergencies. Only 10% said no.

Question 11. Are your relatives, neighbors or friends available to assist the children in case of an emergency? 83.3% of the parents surveyed said yes, someone was available in case the children needed help. 16.7% said that there was no family or friend available to assist the children in case of an emergency.

Question 12 Are you satisfied with the present arrangements? 83.3% of the participants surveyed said yes. 16.7% said No. Of those who said yes: The parents indicated that the children were much safer in the house.

Question 13. Would you be interested in a before or after school program? 93.3% of the participants surveyed were interested in a before or after school program. Only 6.7% said no. Of those who said yes, parents felt that the morning programs would be much safer than the after school programs.

Question 14. As a working parent do you feel comfortable leaving your children without adult supervision? 90% of the mothers said no. 10% said yes. Parents indicated that they leave their children by themselves because they have no choice. To them their jobs are essential.

Question 15. Do you call home regularly? 83.3% of the participants had access to a telephone and could call home regularly. 16.7% said they could only call home during their break or lunch time. However all the parents said that the children had their job telephone number and they could call them if there was an emergency.

Question 16. Are any programs available in your neighborhood? 100% of the participants surveyed said there were a few programs available in their neighborhood, however, they were too expensive.

Question 17. Are there any before or after-school program available at your child's school? 60% of the parents surveyed said yes. 40% said no.

Of those who said yes, parents indicated that their children weren't given enough individual help in the after-school programs. They also felt that there were far too many children assigned to one teacher. One parent said that sometimes the teacher has up to three grade levels in one class. The parents in general felt that the after school program were not organized or structured.

Question 18. Do you set limits on the amount of time your child spends watching TV before and after school? 93.3% of the parents surveyed said no, only 6.7% said yes. Of the parents who said no on their responses, they felt that the children look forward to watching TV after school. They also said as long as the homework was completed , the children could watch their programs.

Question 19. Do you have enough time to help your child with the homework? 80% of the mothers surveyed said yes and 20 % said no. Some parents said they were getting home far too late. When they get home they were too tired to assist the children with their homework.

Question 20. Are you available and willing to work as part of a volunteer parent group to assist in the planning and development of an after-school program? 90% of the participants surveyed said yes , they would be willing to create a program.

According to some of the parents the present school programs need to be reconstructed so that the children can be better served. The 10% who said no, were in favor of a program that works, but were not available to participate in organizing it.

Discussion

The study was designed to investigate if these latchkey children were capable of caring for themselves. According to the results of the survey, an extremely large number of school-age children spend several hours before and after school without adult supervision. Although most of the parents who participated in the survey, perceived child self- care as a positive experience for their children, there were others who found the arrangement convenient, however most of the parents felt guilty, concerned and ambivalent about leaving their youngsters at home alone. A few parents said they have no choice.

When the parents were asked, " Are any of the following of the programs available in your neighborhood?" Some of the parents said they were expensive, others were concerned about the quality of services available in some of the programs.

When they were asked, "Are there any programs available in your child's school?" 60% of the parents in the survey said "yes". A large number of the parents felt that our public after school programs need to be restructured and more organized. They spoke out about the overcrowded classrooms and the lack of supervision due to the limited staff employed to the program.

A majority of the parents said that the children didn't really benefit from these programs. When the parents were asked, What do the children do after school?" Most of the responses were very straight-forward. The parents indicated more or less the same basic procedure. Some children were assigned chores and then they could watch television.

The result indicated that these children spend their free time watching unsupervised television programs. The parents used this means as a reward system for the children. One parent said, "It would be very unfair to set limit on the amount of time child spends watching TV Another one said, 'The television is the only means of entertainment in the house. It keeps them occupied" A few others say, "As long as the homework assignment was completed the children were free to watch their favorite programs. Some were concerned parents said, some of the programs may be appropriate, but whatever the television they are also seeing and hearing the same things from their peers.

The survey also indicated that these children were not privileged to play outside after-school. According to the parents opportunities for neighborhood children to play together after-school have decreased owing to the lack of responsible neighborhood adult in close proximity. They also made reference about drug dealers who were using the children's playground as their main hanging out station.

The parents indicated that the children need to interact and play with their peers but their neighborhood is far from being safe especially in the afternoons.

The parents seemed to be more concerned about their children's safety. One mother said, "I feel comfortable just knowing that the children are in the house." A few parents said they didn't mind sending the children to the programs available before school but they would not support the after-school program unless the neighborhood was safer.

Once the norm, the married couple household, with father employed and mother at home caring for the children is a disappearing pattern. The economic concerns drive mothers to work long hours outside the home. Our rapid changing value system need to address the youngsters who are pushed to take up adult responsibilities far too early.

Many well known studies have concluded that the home and input of the parents are more influential in the child's school achievement than the input of the schooling itself.

The hallmark of middle childhood is the child's participation in a widening circle of new settings first & foremost of these is school. Not surprisingly, the quality of children's adjustment to school is predictive of later adjustment, and critical to long term school success (Alexander & Entwisle 1988 ,page 25)

Peers are a second group that has significant power on a child at this time. If parents are not available, peers become an important support group.

If it is available after-school activities also become an important place for these children to expand their knowledge, circle of friends, their hobbies, special interests and feel safe. It is for these reasons that after-school programs must be developed that fit the needs of the children and not just be a baby-sitting service.

About 1/3 of all school age child care programs in the US are based in schools, according to the data from the National Study of Before & After School Programs (US Dept. Of Education 1993, page 54)
About half of all school based programs are sponsored by the last school; the other half are usually sponsored by community organizations. Schools play an important part therefore in developing grad programs.

If a program is to be successful many factors must be taken into consideration. Positive Interaction between staff, parents and children can create a program that will be a sure success. The staff must enjoy children and working with them. They must be sensitive to children's feelings and support them during times of stress. They encourage all children and do not discriminate for any reason.

The staff should help the children without having control by letting the children suggest activities of their own interest and letting children learn by their own mistakes.

The ratio of staff to children is also important in the success of a program. If groups are small then there is more time for the individual attention that is so important for these children.

After school programs do not work in isolation. Parents play an important role. The staff and parents must frequently communicate with each other in a non-threatening or judgmental way. They must form a partnership that will create programs and solve problems together. If parents are active participants policies can be set that will benefit all concerned.

Another component of a successful after-school program is one that takes into consideration children's daily life and allows time for relaxation, time to create and move through them at a comfortable pace. There should be a time for a snack and a time for that much needed rest. The schedule should allow for these as well as time for the children to participate in activities that they are interested in. The daily activities should be wide and varied. There should be outdoor as well as indoor activities. The programs should have clubs, hobbies, and creative programs as well as special events and activities that challenge them. If a child needs a place to read, study or just daydream that must also be provided.

Programs need to be age appropriate. In early childhood, children learn primarily through play either alone or in small groups. Older children need to see an end product.

While both groups may join together for certain activities, the older children will seek opportunities to pursue their own interests.

Budgets are a big draw back in providing materials which are very important in a successful after-school program. Parents as well as staff play an important role in this area. Both parents and staff must become resourceful. They must try to find sponsors and donations that will fill the gap for much needed materials. If the suppliers are well stocked and varied they will support creative, cognitive as well as fine and gross motor skills.

With an after-school program that meets all of the needs of the children and parents concerns can be somewhat lessened. A good program would reduce the amount of time children are left alone feeling bored. It would reduce the risks of accidents and give children the time to be outdoors in a safe area. While these programs cannot give the children a complete sense of physical security even a small amount of security can mean a lot. It would provide that much needed time for social development as well as time to develop new interests and skills.

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